

American MASTERS

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press information



PBS

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Director's Q&A

AMERICAN MASTERS Pete Seeger: The Power of Song.

AMERICAN MASTERS Pete Seeger: The Power of Song – the first and only authorized biography of the singer/songwriter – premieres Wednesday, February 27 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). The film is directed by three-time Emmy Award-winner Jim Brown, who answers some questions about the film below.

Q: What first got you interested in doing a film on Pete Seeger?

A: I thought Pete Seeger would make a good subject for a documentary because he had been so criticized over the years for his idealistic beliefs, and after 88 years he's had one of the most perfect lives of anybody I know. He's been dedicated to humanity and the earth and the environment – he's thought really hard about those things – and he's also lived outside all the commercial messages that we constantly get bombarded with. In a way, he reminds me of what America could be and maybe should be in his idealism and his belief in democracy.

Q: When did you first become aware of Pete Seeger?

A: I'm 57 years old and I grew up as the folk revival was in full force. As a youngster I was very aware of Pete Seeger and the Weavers as being at the forefront of that movement. When I was about 12, I was in a little band and actually played on a stage that Pete played on. Later, when I was about 16, his good friend, probably his best friend, Lee Hays, moved into the town of Croton where I was living and I ended up working for Lee as a gardener. Pete would visit him and I would sit in the background and listen to these great stories about their work together in the Almanacs or the Weavers, or Woody Guthrie or Leadbelly, two friends of theirs that very much influenced both of them. I got really excited by all the things they were talking about and as time went on, I went into film and became rather close to Lee Hays, who was dying and wanted to get together with the Weavers one last time before he died. We actually made a film about that. They went back to Carnegie Hall for a triumphant reunion called *The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time!* On and off over the years, I've worked with Pete quite a bit.

Q: While making the film, did you learn anything that surprised you?

A: One of the things that surprised me about Pete was that he really was the real deal. He's exactly what you see. I thought if I had a chance to spend weeks and days with him that maybe I would see something different, but I didn't. He really is very true to his beliefs. He's very uncomfortable with the idea of celebrity and, actually, kind of fought the idea of making this film several times when we'd proposed it before because he is so uncomfortable with that idea of celebrity. He really does believe everybody is equal.

One of the things that I didn't know about Pete that I learned in doing the film was that at the height of his blacklisting and his speaking out against the government in terms of the war in Vietnam, there was actually somebody who came to a concert with the intent of killing him. That was a story I had

not heard before; it had kind of been suppressed. The outcome of it was really quite incredible. The guy who was upset at him singing all these anti-war songs in the end became so moved by what Pete was really all about that he ended up going backstage and meeting Pete and telling him his intent. They ended up singing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" together at the end, which was a typical Pete Seeger ending for that kind of drama.

Q: Are there any interesting anecdotes about the filming or the interviews?

A: In making the film, we very much solicited the help of Toshi Seeger, Pete's wife, who was very much at the forefront of everything he did, but in the background. Like Pete, she's a shy person who does not really want to be a public person. She helped us gather all the materials that they had collected in their barn. She herself had been a filmmaker and they had made some movies together over the years, which became some of the stock footage that we used in this film. One of the things we wanted to do was to get her to appear on camera. She had always been reluctant to do that, with just about every film crew. Finally, with Pete's persuasion and the persuasion of her family, she agreed to sit down and be interviewed with Pete and participate in the process. And I think we get a rather complete perspective of who Pete is, with her participation.

Q: Please describe your approach to the film.

A: When I was thinking about how to make the film, one of the things that stood out, besides incorporating all the stock footage that the Seegers had and telling the rather linear progression of his life, I wanted to use nature throughout the film because nature was something that's very important to Pete, what he stands for. It's also where he spends a lot of time to think things out. It's something he and I share in common, and we also live in the same area. I used the Hudson River and the seasons. Here's a man in the winter of his life, so we used winter a lot as a metaphor through making the film. Some of the scenes at their little mountaintop homestead kind of evolve through the seasons, and that was something that I thought about originally and decided that we'd weave through the film.

Q: What were some of the obstacles in achieving your vision of the film?

A: One of the things that made the film a little more difficult was that I was close to Pete. I'd known him most of my life. I really wanted a film that would celebrate and probe who he was and his effect on America. I think that connection sometimes makes it hard for a filmmaker to come to an end. I really wanted it to be as good as I could possibly make it. One thing that made the film a little bit difficult was that Pete is actually a pretty shy person. He's been public as an artist, but his personal life is something that he keeps rather private. To get close to him over a period of time was somewhat hard. His whole family helped us do that and as we got closer to him, we learned more about him.

Q: Please describe your background credits and how they may have led to this film.

A: I've spent a lot of my life making films about American music, especially in the roots tradition of American music, American folk music. I've always had an awareness of who Pete is and his importance in that area. I've been influenced by him. Pete Seeger, along with Alan Lomax and Pete's father, Charles Seeger, were really the forces behind America appreciating its own folk music. They realized it at a time when we were a young nation and most people weren't aware that we had our own musical tradition. They thought that that was something that America should be in touch with.

Part of what I've done has always been connected to that. I've worked on films about the pollution of the Hudson River. Some of my first work was in public television, and we'd take polluters to

court. Pete was somewhat involved in that. I made a film about “We Shall Overcome” that was also linked to Pete. I made a series called *American Roots Music* that had links to Pete. Over the years, I also did some concerts with him. I also made a film about Woody Guthrie. He certainly has been all over my work in terms of either inspiring it or being connected to it in some way.

Q: With so much great music to choose from, how did you decide which songs to use in order to tell the story in the most compelling way?

A: Part of the power of song in Pete’s vision is that many people sing together. He popularized the idea of singing together at a time when we were paying other people to sing for us. He wanted to remind us that singing and singing together with other people is a great part of the human experience. So many of the songs that we selected reflect that kind of feeling of going to a concert with Pete, where there’s this wall of sound that he creates with all the audience singing different harmony parts. We looked for the best representations of that.

Pete has done many albums, I think close to 100, but basically he was not filmed that much because he was blacklisted. So even though he had a rather pivotal role in American music, he was kept off American commercial television for 17 years. Selecting the concerts was actually not that hard because there weren’t that many of them. Thank God there was Canadian television where most of them are from, because even though he was blacklisted in the United States he was able to perform in Canada.

Q: Did you uncover any rare gems during your research?

A: One of the things we were able to knit together was the story about Pete being kept off commercial television for 17 years. One of the most striking chapters of that story was how it ended. It was during the Vietnam War and the Smothers Brothers had a show on television that was popular and they used that popularity as leverage to get Pete back on commercial television. He wanted to sing a song that he had written called “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” which was really about President Johnson’s inability to get us out of the war in Vietnam at that time. Because that war was founded on lies and had probably half the country speaking out against it, it seems that that chapter of this film is very resonant to the times today with the Iraq war. Being able to knit together footage from the Smothers Brothers show with our interviews with them is, I think, one of the things people will respond to in the film.

Q: One of the most revealing scenes in the movie occurs in Washington Square Park, when fans come up to Seeger to thank him for his many contributions. Is that a reaction you witnessed often?

A: People who were influenced by Pete were influenced a lot by him. I get a lot of emails, I talk to a lot of people who have seen the film and for some people, he’s like a 20th- and 21st-century American philosopher. He also became a voice that ground into people what was important about democracy, what was important about the political process in America, what was important about our environment and, most importantly, what was important about speaking out. Pete was always somebody who spoke his mind and people seem to appreciate that about him. That is only amplified when he plays music – where those things are reflected in the lyrics he’s written to the songs that he performs.

Q: Some people might say this film is a love letter to Seeger. Do you think it’s a balanced portrait?

A: I tried to make this a balanced portrait, even though I was very influenced by Pete. Pete was a controversial figure and I think as a controversial figure he was very misunderstood. He

advocated for labor unions. He was on the forefront of the civil rights movement. He was a very distinct voice protesting the war that was built on lies in Vietnam. He has been a force, a major force about speaking out for the environment. These things were controversial because they went against money and power. He was also a member of the Communist Party for a brief time and during that time, I think, he was attracted to the ideals of American Communism that everybody is the same. In 1949, when he realized that Stalin was involved in atrocities going on in Russia he removed himself from the Communist Party. But he continued to be involved in that idealism that attracted him to the Communist Party. We tried to ask probing questions again and again about the controversial aspects of Pete's career. But I really think, on balance, in the long run, he was on the proper side of all those things that he got criticized about.

Q: Who are some of the artists who helped realize your vision of the film?

A: In making the film, I found that not only was I influenced by Pete, but a lot of American musicians were. We're very happy that people like Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen and Bonnie Raitt and Peter, Paul and Mary, Tom Paxton, Natalie Mains of the Dixie Chicks all participated in this film to help tell Pete's story and also tell why he's relevant to America and American music.

Q: How important was public television to Pete Seeger during his career?

A: First, Pete is an American original and an American Master. And secondly, public television represents freedom of the airwaves, freedom of speech that Pete has been so associated with. At the height of the folk revival, he was kept off a commercial show called *Hootenanny* but was allowed to be on public television with a show that he helped create called *Rainbow Quest*. I think, to some degree, Pete Seeger and public television share the belief that to have a democratic society it's important to have a place to speak out and speak freely without corporate influence. I'm very happy that public television and *AMERICAN MASTERS* is the place we're showing *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*.

Q: Is Pete Seeger a patriot?

A: One of the ironic things about Pete and his story is that in the mid '50s and the '60s he was somewhat scorned in the Hudson Valley because of his political beliefs. He wasn't allowed to play concerts. People would picket his concerts almost on a regular basis. Once he started to get involved in the Hudson River, he almost became a local hero and people began to realize who he was. They saw that he was really patriotic. They saw that his actions were sometimes misinterpreted by those people who gave him negative publicity. They realized that Pete was really a great guy and he was making a difference. That includes kids growing up in those communities and people who were on the right side of things politically. People like George Pataki, somebody that I think was greatly influenced by Pete's work on the Hudson River and, as a governor, who enacted a lot of legislation to help protect the Hudson River.

Pete and his wife Toshi, even though they're in their eighties, they are working tirelessly on a local level to do whatever they can to make this world a better place. There are so many negative forces at play bringing the world down – commercial forces, political forces – that they think that if people work together, they might find the right way.

Q: Tell us about Seeger and the phrase “think globally, act locally.”

A: In the late '60s, Pete Seeger got involved with the Hudson River. He was sailing a small boat there and realized that what he was sailing in was heavily polluted and that the government had been involved in turning that beautiful river into an industrial river that allowed for pollution, dumping and increased building along the shore. He was one of our first environmentalists and embraced a phrase that somebody else coined – “think globally, act locally.” Pete has probably

conducted most of his life since the '60s on that basis. So the last chapter of the film really deals with his work in the community and the Hudson River, which has been probably one of the longest chapters of his life. Here's a man who really doesn't like to be public, and yet who is spending most of his energy trying to make things better, better for the earth, better for the human condition, better for the environment. He believes the best place to do that is in his own community. That's quite a concept we can all embrace.

Q: What are some of Seeger's greatest songs, in your opinion?

A: Pete Seeger was never interested in writing commercial music, he just wanted to write music that people would enjoy and sing that also reflected some of his concerns. He gave us some real gems, including a song that he wrote with Lee Hays, "If I Had a Hammer" or "The Hammer Song," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." He also helped popularize "Guantanamo." He took a piece of Ecclesiastics from the Bible and wrote "Turn, Turn, Turn." His songs are beautifully crafted and have, I would say, sustained in some cases, for three or four generations. There's something unusual about that in a culture where pop music is every new flavor of the month.

Q: Tell us about Seeger's relationship with Arlo Guthrie.

A: Although a lot of people were influenced by Pete and have played with him over the years, probably no one knows him better as a performer than Arlo Guthrie. Arlo's father, of course, palled around with Pete and hitchhiked around the country when Pete was a teenager. But starting in the '60s and almost until the present, Pete and Arlo have played numerous concerts together. They shared the same manager, Harold Leventhal. Actually, as a part of making this film, we filmed Harold's last concert before he died. He was a concert promoter, manager and producer and every year he had a yearly concert at Carnegie Hall. We filmed that concert, which was hosted by Arlo Guthrie, with Pete and the Weavers and Pete's grandson, Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary – different people. It's included in this film but it will also be released as a concert unto itself called *Isn't This a Time!*, borrowing from the title of the Weavers' song in our film from some 30 years ago, *Wasn't That a Time!*

Q: How did the film come to fruition?

A: It takes a lot of people to make a film and I've been lucky enough to have some wonderful collaborators. Some people have been with me as part of my team for quite a long time, like Nicole Craig and Sarah Cohen, also Sam Pollard, who's a frequent collaborator, probably one of the best editors in New York. He and his son, Jason Pollard, did the editing, which took over two years to complete. One of the most important collaborators was Michael Cohl, the manager of The Rolling Stones and one of the world's largest concert promoters.

Pete's late manager, Harold Leventhal, had actually come to Pete several times with the idea of making a biography. And while he was somewhat amenable to the concept, he was always reluctant because he really is very uncomfortable with the idea of celebrity and being in the forefront of anything commercial. As time went on, I filmed scenes that might go in such a film. Pete talked about the film coming out after he was gone. After Bush was elected, I'd just interviewed him for another film and he said, "Maybe we should make the film about me now. I'd like to have a hand in it and I think it could be useful in these times." Near that same time, I had gotten a call from Michael Cohl in Canada and he and his associate Billy Eigen had said that they would like to help make a film about Pete Seeger. It turns out that Michael, as a youngster, went to a camp outside of Toronto where the Weavers and Pete used to play, and that music changed his life. I think Michael wanted to give something back.

Editor's note: This Q&A has been edited for length and clarity.

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